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OPINION - MONDAY, DECEMBER 3

BEING GAY NOT AN ISSUE IN INDEPENDENT-MINDED ANGOLA

by **Lula Ahrens**

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Transsexual kuduro star Titica: talented, sexy, elegant and adored by women and men alike

LUANDA | ANGOLA: Unlike the situation in countries like Uganda, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, Angolans tolerate LGBT people and even applaud those with talent, provided they keep their sexual orientation private. Of course, there's a significant difference between "tolerance" and "acceptance", but still, what accounts for the relative open-minded of Angolans on this issue, and could an open debate on LGBT issues be the next step?

You don't have to look long or hard to find homosexuals, lesbians and even transsexuals in Luanda. They are a noticeable and regular visitors of arty night club Elinga and posh, trendy [Kasta Lounge](#). Heterosexuals are welcome at gay underground parties when invited by gay friends. Passers-by

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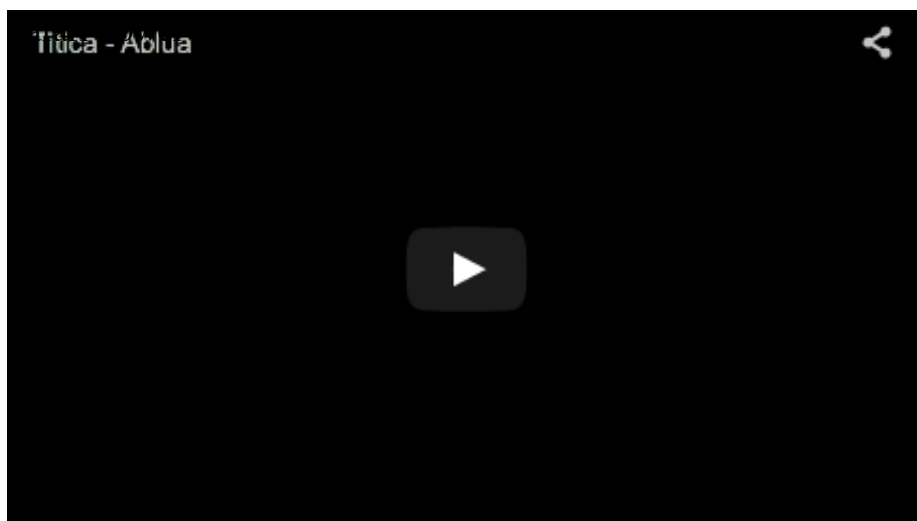


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and fellow party people hardly raise an eyebrow in their company – cheeky remarks among friends is generally as far as ‘discrimination’ goes. Hardly surprising, perhaps, in a country where people are crazy about their openly transsexual superstar Titica, officially named best kuduro artist of 2012.

Titica worked hard to achieve her current level of fame and popularity. “Angolans will only believe in you if you’re good at what you do,” she said during a brief interview held previously in Luanda’s city centre. “Life for me as a transsexual was difficult at the beginning of my career. I was despised, threatened, I had to endure a lot. Now, men, women, children and the elderly are thrilled whenever they see me.”



She is not the only Angolan LGBT celebrity who is now more or less accepted by Angolan society. “It’s their talent that counts,” renowned social journalist Suzana Mendes explains. “When Angolans see Titica, they go: ‘She’s a good performer!’ first, and ‘Ah, she’s a transsexual,’ second.”

LGBT Angola, a closed community

There are, however, rules to Angolans’ tolerance of LGBT people. Titica is the only well-known Angolan who is reasonably open about her sexual orientation, even if only due to her striking appearance. Strong rumors about a famous, supposedly gay member of an influential Angolan family have never been confirmed.

In Angola, it’s still not done to say “I’m gay”, and an open debate on LGBT issues is notably absent. Even the Angolan constitution does not explicitly mention LGBT citizens.

They can, in theory, be prosecuted under an old Portuguese-colonial law on the grounds of “offenses against public morality”,

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punishable by hard labour for repeat offenders. But there are no known records of it ever being used against gays, bisexuals or transsexuals. In the same vein, political parties neither formally support nor reject LGBT rights.

Interviewing openly gay friends for this article proved extremely difficult.

Mrs Mendes and Simão Cacumba from local NGO SCARJoV both confirm that Angolan LGBT people form a fairly closed community. They organize their own parties and get-togethers, and they support and protect each other, professionally and otherwise.

According to Mr Cacumba, many gay Angolans still marry members of the opposite sex under pressure from their families, and cope by having secret same-sex affairs. Mrs Mendes suspects that LGBT Angolans keep their sexual orientation private because they feel that culturally, Angola is not yet ready to recognize LGBT rights. “They probably want to respect that and avoid shocking people.”

Zimbabwean Human Rights Watch (HRW) researcher Monica Tabengwa notes that, as a consequence of societal pressure, there hasn't been an open debate on LGBT issues in Angola. “I imagine that it's taking a long time for the debate to materialize due to everything being put on hold during the civil war [1975-2002],” she said.



The carnival offers Angolan gays, lesbians and transsexuals a rare opportunity to celebrate their sexuality in public

Homophobia's colonial roots

In many African countries, homosexuality and LGBT rights are denounced as a foreign import, and religion more often than not inspires anti-gay crusades. But one could just as easily argue that Western colonizers introduced the opposite - politicized and religious homophobia - to their African backyard centuries ago.

“Before Portuguese colonization, various types of LGBT people co-existed in Angola and the rest of Africa,” Human Rights Watch researcher Monica Tabengwa from Botswana told This is Africa. “People followed their true nature. They didn't mind whether someone was gay or not, as long as they kept their sexual preferences to themselves and their families.”

When European ruling classes enforced anti-homosexual legislation in their colonial empires around the globe, that easy attitude changed. Same-sex acts are still illegal and in some cases punishable by death in at least 38 out of 54 African countries and in some 80 countries worldwide.

Interestingly, around forty of Britain's former colonies still rely on its colonial “sodomy laws” - Britain's Victorian-era homophobia was most intense.

But the Portuguese were not what one would call open-minded either. In the seventeenth century, Portuguese colonizers expanded their anti-homosexual laws to include females. The sentence was to be burned alive at the stake.

Portugal decriminalized homosexuality roundabout the same time that Angola gained independence (1975) and was plunged into civil war (1975-2002). For at least the next three decades, Angola had more immediate concerns than sexual discrimination.

Voices of protest

In an arguably cynical turn of events from a historical point of view, in 1991 Amnesty International announced that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is a violation of human rights. Ex-colonies were and are still expected to follow suit.

Just last year, anti-gay Uganda and Ghana rejected the UK's threat to cut aid if they refused to legalize homosexuality, with Uganda accusing the UK of showing a “bullying mentality” and treating Ugandans like “children”.

“Uganda, Nigeria and Liberia are telling Britain: ‘Don’t tell us what to do’, within the framework of the colonial debate,” Mrs Tabengwa said. “They want to assert their independence and choose to go in the opposite direction.

“Angola, on the other hand, does not feel patronized, and it does not depend on Portuguese aid. Yes, that probably *does* go some way in explaining why Angola is easy on LGBT people.”



Carnival time

The seed of change: Bruna’s wedding

Angolan nanny Linda (30) lives in a Luandan slum, has received little education and has never traveled outside Angola. But she is more open-minded in many respects than a lot of Western Europeans. “Homosexuals are the best decorators, make-up artists, event managers and hair stylists in the world, and they treat women like princesses,” she said, kissing the air to enforce her statement. “They are excellent cooks, and very endearing,

very articulate.”

“My [heterosexual] brother has a gay friend. Two of my husband’s friends are gay. When they enter the room with their feminine walk, they go: ‘Gooood afternoon! Then they smack my child’s bottom and go: ‘Cuuute!’ We and our friends love them.”

But this cheerful atmosphere only began to form a few years ago, she said. “When I was a child, being gay was a crime. Homosexuals weren’t put in prison, but they were badly discriminated against. My former neighbor was beaten by his parents as a teenager. They cut off his hair and told him to leave. But they didn’t manage to change him. Now that he’s a grown man they have to accept him for who he is.”

According to Linda, Angolans’ general attitude towards LGBT people began to change after “Bruna’s wedding”.

On 6 May 2005, Angolan gay couple - 21-year-old Aleksander Gregório (Chano) and ‘Bruna’ (23) – shocked the nation by signing a letter of commitment in the presence of a retired notary. The event was extensively covered and attacked by the Angolan media.

“Bruna’s unofficial gay wedding was the first to appear in the press,” Mrs Mendes said. “Gays then admitted that they had been organizing these ceremonies for a long time. There is even a special book in which gay marriages are registered. LGBT people are still waiting for the day when gay marriage becomes official.”



A transsexual performing a Christina Aguilera playback act at an underground gay party in Luanda (location - a deserted school building)

Relaxed religion, relaxed tradition

That will not happen overnight. Angola's attitude with regard to sexual orientation is still heavily influenced by the Portuguese Christian tradition. More than half of Angolans are Catholic. Others include Evangelicals, Lutherans, "African Christians", Jehovah's Witnesses and small groups of Muslims and followers of indigenous African religions.

Traditional rural communities are harsher on LGBT people than in the cities, where popular culture prevails and people tend to mind their own business.

Still, in 2010, Angola [refused to welcome openly gay Isi Yanouka](#)

as the new Israeli ambassador. Last but not least, LGBT Angolans' rapidly increasing visibility is sometimes met with fearful and hateful reactions from those who still take offense.

"Titica is a guy, he will never become a woman because he will never give birth to a new human being," wrote one opinion maker last year in the independent Angolan weekly *Folha 8*. "In the New Testament, Apostle Paulus says that homosexual behavior deserves death... Idiotic and detesting, God is against your existence!"

But overall, Angolans do not take cultural rules very literally, and Angola has few religious fanatics, Mrs Mendes said. "The churches speak out against gays, but not as part of a broader campaign. They don't say: 'Go and attack those people'.

"We are very open to outside influences as a result of Portuguese colonization, the civil war, and now the expats. Angola has many local languages and religions. We have learned how to be open-minded and live together."

Wide open future

Angola is not alone in its relatively high level of tolerance of LGBT people. Zimbabwean Human Rights Watch researcher Monica Tabengwa notes that similar attitudes can be seen in all former Portuguese colonies. In Cape Verde, homosexuality was even legalized in 2004. Whether Angola is slowly drifting in the same direction remains to be seen.

One thing is clear: Angola neither receives nor needs outside pressure in formulating its own LGBT policy. It is doing that by itself, from within, and that's as it should be.

TAGS: ANGOLA, GAY, HOMOSEXUAL, KUDURO, HOMOSEXUALITY, TITICA, LGBT, GAY RIGHTS

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**akwaabamusic** • 4 years ago

I remember when I first heard Titica, thinking "how the F is this possible in an African country?"

Great piece. Just a few notes:

- public display of affection towards a lover is not common in the vast majority of traditional African cultures. Even a husband kissing his wife on the lips is mostly frowned upon. Consequently, coming across as gay, having effeminate maners, etc, is also a foreign concept. So it's not so much being gay that is a problem in Africa, but rather showing gay. In other words, the problem is coming out of the closet. Traditionally, nobody asks what goes on in the bedroom.

- I bring this up because clearly Angolans, or at least Luandans, are way less concerned with modesty and decency, as dictated by tradition. Just as shocking to me as seeing a transsexual on Angolan TV, is seeing girls in thongs at the beach - everywhere else I've been in Africa, women at the beach usually keep at least a loose t-shirt and shorts on at all times. And every beach I've seen in Luanda puts Ipanema to shame.

- more generally, the Portuguese may have been just as religious as the British, but Angola today, or at least Luanda, is way, way less conservative than any other place I've been to in Africa - that includes Ghana and Uganda, which you mention in your piece. I was in Ghana earlier this year when homosexuality became the topic of choice, and the immense majority of critics used Christianity as their sole argument and shield.

So less religion and less tradition in Angola, or rather, in Luanda.

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**eve** • 4 years ago

beautiful article - should be read worldwide!

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**Antonio Cardoso** • 4 years ago

Brilliant article. Thank you very much!

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Mayflower1978 • 5 months ago

Good for Angola. But anyways being Gay is still Illegal in Angola. :(

I Hope that sooner or later that the Anti-Gay is Abolished and Angola will be a Gay-Friendly Country like South Africa.

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Kevin Peters • 2 years ago

Why is it that white people always feel so concerned "backward" thinking of Africans. If the majority of African people hate to see expressions of such lifestyles, would it not be backward to make them tolerate or accept such lifestyles? Most Africans are very conservative. There is nothing natural about this behavior.

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joey • 4 years ago

as long as they kept their sexual preferences to themselves and their families..
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